**I can’t call it nostalgia—it’s nice not to see floating bodies in the East River—but reading about New York’s mob scene of the 1940s and ‘50s never fails to fascinate. It’s the smoky newsroom, the smooth-talking Italian gang boss, and the gruff dockworkers that are so seductive.**

**Nathan Ward, a freelance writer, who began researching the waterfront when he lived in South Brooklyn—in a brownstone owned by an old Italian longshoreman with missing fingers—has written a rich and entertaining account of the mob leaders who once controlled the docks that jutted out from Manhattan’s edges. The book reminds us that there is some historical truth behind those Hollywood mobster movies.**

**In Dark Harbor (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, $26.00), Ward tells the story of New York Sun journalist Malcolm “Mike” Johnson and his bombshell investigative pieces on the criminal activity along New York’s waterfront. Mike Johnson’s twenty-four stories won him the 1949 Pulitzer Prize for local reporting and served as the basis for Elia Kazan’s film On the Waterfront. The harbors were an underground world that feel much grittier than the less-than-exciting fake luxury handbag trade you hear about today.**

**Back then, life as a longshoremen (the term comes from when dock workers yelled “Men ‘long shore!” at the arrival of shipments from Europe) was dangerous and unpredictable. When each freight-bearing vessel entered the harbor, groups of men crowded together, hungry for work. In what was called a “shape-up,” hiring bosses selected their gang of men to work for the day. If you missed one shape-up you’d run down to the next pier and hope to be picked. Most men were sent home.**

**The clincher was that hiring bosses knew who they were going to pick beforehand. It was all decided in advance and controlled by the mobsters and labor racketeers. Those picked would work for four or sixteen hours. If they weren’t part of a work gang, they could be without work for a week.**

**Ward introduces us to Joe Ryan, the sixty-four year-old president of the International Longshoremen’s Association, the labor union, who Johnson later charged with having financial interests in several large shippers, working with a network of police aids and allies, and detectives whose protection had long enabled Ryan’s “strong-arm squads” to intimidate longshoremen.**

**Our hero, reporter Mike Johnson, arrived at The Sun in 1928, a Georgia native with a slight Southern accent. The paper was the most conservative of Manhattan’s nine dailies, but eighth in circulation. Johnson, who had a penchant for investigative journalism, soon became the paper’s best general assignment reporter. After a crime in Northern Manhattan that sounded suspiciously similar to a previous crime in Greenwich Village, Johnson was sent to cover the story and possibly connect the two cases in a wider story about dock wars.**

**Johnson gleefully went to the piers, notebook in hand, but quickly realized that dock workers were afraid to talk. It took weeks for Johnson to finally land a couple of lucky breaks and get people to talk about the power structure and the way things worked in the harbors. After months of digging, Johnson approached his editors with an outline for a series of investigative pieces. He was confident he could prove that mobsters and labor racketeers controlled the world’s largest piers.**

**The first story finally broke under the headline: “Crime on the Waterfront: Mobsters, Linked to Vast International Crime Syndicate, Rule New York Piers by Terror and Harvest Millions.” It was a national story. Johnson began getting death threats, but received more calls with crime tips. Ward writes, “A checker called to tell Johnson about a particular “hot” West Side pier run by the Dunn gang. ‘The gangsters wouldn’t let me stay there because I was honest . . . Look into the thievery there. I know for a fact that 15,000 cases of spaghetti were stolen there only recently.’” Johnson estimated $50 million a year was lost in “systematic thievery.”**

**Joe Ryan, as had become the custom, claimed Communism against his enemies. The articles inspired Arthur Miller and Budd Schulberg to visit the docks for themselves, and Schulberg went on to write the screenplay for On the Waterfront. (Miller wrote a treatment of the story himself, but political pressures on the Columbia Pictures created demands for Miller to change the villains from corrupt union officials to evil communists, creating a “pro-American” feel.)Years later, it was said Schulberg’s movie was a symbol for the Cold War, disguised as a mob movie. After reading Ward’s book, it seems that the movie was simply about the mob—there was plenty of material. In the end, The Sun folded soon after Johnson’s stories ran. The articles couldn’t save the failing newspaper. And while Joe Ryan and the other gang bosses were eventually convicted of crimes, the mob never fully went away . . .**

**Dark Harbor manages to pull together the politics, journalism, and New York City, and Hollywood of the time into a cohesive story. The book is an immensely enjoyable read—you feel like you’re tapping into the New York that lies under the freshly-painted bike paths up and down Broadway; the dark underworld that we’ve paved over with the pedestrian-friendly pathway along the West Side Highway. It’s the New York that was open for the taking.**

**I took a dinner boat cruise a couple of years ago around Manhattan. The skyline was lit up in all of its modern glamour, but the waters were dark and silent. If I had a giant search light, I would have shined a light at those piers—I might have seen the ghosts of the longshoremen.**

**Buy it here: Amazon • Barnes & Noble • Borders • IndieBound • Farrar, Straus & Giroux**